

Personal Perspectives on Parliament Upper House*

Marise Payne

It is sometimes suggested that parliaments would be better places if they had more female representation because women are perceived to be less combative, good listeners, superior relationship-builders and are thought to be inclusive consensus-builders.

I'm sure that if you were to put this hypothesis to a random group of women parliamentarians, you would get wildly varying responses. Some may hold strong views for example that militarism and trans-national terrorism are a direct result of women being disenfranchised from the political process and even that women are intrinsically better 'people'. Others may hold that women's participation makes no particular difference to policy outcomes—but that women nonetheless should be better represented in politics logically, if for no other reason than because not to do so runs the risk of ignoring 50 per cent of the world's capacity.

Much of the current research into leadership and managerial style has been carried out with a focus on how corporations are managed, with the results extrapolated to apply to the world of politics. From experience, I would argue strongly that findings from the corporate sector are not easily transferred to the political environment.

Mountains of analysis are testament to the fascination of researchers with the leadership style of women, and in fact whether there is one. On this the jury is still

* Reprint of 'Personal Perspectives on Parliament: Upper House', *Reform*, Issue 83, 2003, p. 31.

out. For example, business research conducted by Elke Dobner¹ indicates that women do have a different management style from men. Men, it is said, tend to exert pressure from the top down, whereas more commonly women use teams to reach a common solution. She argues that the EQ (emotional quotient) is simply higher in women than in men.

Other writers, including German political and business adviser Gertrud Höhler go so far as to say that men might focus more, however women also take the periphery of the spectrum into account. The same research argues that men pursue goals, women look at the people who are to achieve them. In terms of communication, Ms Höhler observes that men communicate strategically, women communicate in order to engender trust.

Over the past several years there has been an abundance of research projects comparing traditional intelligence (IQ) with emotional intelligence (EQ) in the business world. The findings highlight that emotional qualities such as mentoring, relationship-building and team-building are increasingly sought by employers. The basic argument is that businesses can train up staff in the necessary technical standard, but if they do not possess superior interpersonal skills, overall company performance will not be maximised.

By their nature, parliamentarians tend to be social creatures, and so the vast majority of political men and women alike tend to be skilled communicators and relationship-builders—certainly the successful ones. Modern political parties are acutely aware of the importance of team-building to electoral success, and so there is a high commitment to this value.

The best illustrator in my area of activity of how this is so, is in the work of Senate Committees. Much of a senator's workload revolves around the parliamentary committee process. Away from the spectacle of the parliamentary chamber—an environment that often reflects and rewards aggression and combativeness—senators from a range of political persuasions come together with the prevailing motivation of working for the advancement and good governance of the country. Certainly political points can be scored, and often are, through the committee system, but on balance arriving at recommendations for improving government policy and legislation is far more often the norm.

Report recommendations are arrived at after the committee members focus on the issues, meet with experts, read background materials, and ask questions and listen to witnesses' answers during public hearings. Over many years I can vouch that the final stage of the process—debate within the committee on drafting a report—has little if anything to do with the gender of committee members. It is the strength of arguments, and of course the political numbers just occasionally, that will win over the committee, not the employment of 'wiles and guile'.

Another argument that stretches across the sectors is that women try harder to prove their competence in male-dominated industries In his interview in a recent *Business*

¹ E. Dobner, *Frauen in Führungspositionen [How Women Lead]*, Sauer, Heidelberg, 2001.

Review Weekly article, Ron Walker says: ‘Women do more work in analysing board papers than men. By their own instinct, they want to make sure they don’t miss anything.’² In the same edition, Mark Leibler, a senior partner at the Melbourne law firm Arnold Block Leibler and a director of Coles Myer, says: ‘Some men think it’s their God-given right to sit on boards, whereas it is more unusual for women, so they make a better fist of it.’³

It would certainly be interesting to know if these observations have been reinforced by any research. My own casual observations on the effectiveness of parliamentarians—looking at political approach, work style, staff management, level of activity, preparation for meetings and so on—owes little to gender, but much to enthusiasm, commitment, engagement and, from time to time, ambition.

Most compellingly though, I return to the argument that any endeavour, political or otherwise, that does not encourage and actively pursue the involvement of women denies itself the benefit of 50 per cent of the community’s intellect, perspective and contribution.

And in political terms, particularly in the fraught world environment, it is apposite to cite the words of Burma’s Nobel Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi:

It is not the prerogative of men alone to bring light to this world. Women—with their capacity for compassion and self sacrifice, their courage and perseverance—have done much to dissipate the darkness of intolerance and hate.⁴

² A. Gome and E. Ross, ‘The 20 most powerful women in Australian business’, *Business Review Weekly*, 3–9 October 2002, p. 50.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi. Speech delivered by videotape to NGO Forum on Women, Beijing, 31 August 1995.

